

Japan's Civilization, Japan's Others

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Japan and its Others: globalization, difference and the critique of modernity

JOHN CLAMMER, 2001

Melbourne, Trans Pacific Press

Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan

J. S. EADES, TOM GILL AND HARUMI BEFU (eds), 2000

Melbourne, Trans Pacific Press

Foreign Migrants in Contemporary Japan

HIROSHI KOMAI, 2001

Melbourne, Trans Pacific Press

Otherness is a pivotal theme in studies of inter-cultural conditions. It is a focal point for several positions in debates around identity politics ranging from liberal critics of multiculturalism to radical nativists. In a different register, it is also the language of post-enlightenment philosophy. For postcolonial thinkers, it has served as a concept on which criticism has pivoted. From this standpoint, subalterns are products of a social system that silences them, even as it is compelled create them. This concept is also the basis for epistemological critique for the proponents of the indigenisation of science. Otherness and the coterminous, though not synonymous, notion of difference are therefore invoked together most often in research into the social construction of ethnicity and gender.

There are good reasons for this, as otherness and difference are each usually employed heuristically to aid understanding of vital social and cultural experiences. Nonetheless, it is possible to expand the theorisation of otherness, strangeness and difference beyond the forms of marginalisation developed in and transformed through institutional structures, and even beyond those relations that are most starkly

ethnicised and gendered. There are civilisational settings—or, if you will, cosmological horizons—that radically inform root conceptions of otherness. Difference and otherness can be seen, in this regard, as problems of modernity and perhaps of a more nuanced range of subjectivities. This suggests a wider frame of interpretation to account for the constitution of difference through religion, competing visions of politics and citizenship and actually-existing forces of globalisation.

John Clammer's *Japan and its Others*, Hiroshi Komai's *Foreign Migrants in Contemporary Japan* and the collection of essays in *Globalization and Social Change in Contemporary Japan* in various ways shed light on the deeper dimensions of difference and they do so in separate examinations of Japanese modernity. Each showcases wide-ranging approaches. Komai and Clammer's research extends further to reach conclusions that complement civilizational perspectives emerging in Japanese Studies, though neither explicitly locates itself within that framework. Moreover, the case of Japan can serve to illustrate most clearly how local cosmology demarcates the parameters of otherness. Komai's book contributes important insights in this regard. He documents the monoculturality of the Japanese mainstream in respect of the place of migrants. But he also detects a line of defiance in the alternative vision of citizenship operating at the level of municipal government. This is a form of cultural recognition that undercuts the mainstream. Of course, municipal governments are hardly marginal. In any case, centres and margins are not fixed in the Japanese constellation as the essays edited by Eades and others show. Gender and ethnicity are important identities in the world of paid work and beyond it. But there are other sorts of identity explored in the ethnographies written up in this collection. Some are constituted in the past and they are now under challenge. This books shows that the idea of marginality should be reproblematised in the Japanese context, as

Japan has a long history of shifting socio-economic, political and cultural centres. The histories of capitalism, state formation and religion all reflect movements of centres and margins.

Clammer comes closest to articulating an explicit civilizational perspective. For this reason, he seems to have the most to say that is original and penetrating about the dimensions of otherness in the Japanese context. Following observations made by Bauman and Barthes, he characterises Japan as an ‘intensely “sociological society”’ (p.90) in which relations with others are densely configured. This seems a relational or contextual society founded on a double ethic. One ethic applies to the Japanese and it standardises relational patterns. There is a second ethic reserved for foreigners and it acts to keep the world at arm’s length, so to speak. Japanese modernity is unusual then, in that it minimises, in Bauman’s words, the influence of strangers. This is a relationship to the world as a whole and not just to people. Difference in Japan, the search for an exit from ‘universal history’ and the attempt to differentiate an alternative trajectory are themes considered as a disposition to the outside world.

For Clammer, then, cosmology is the starting point for an examination of difference, rather than the culture or ideology of ultra-nationalism per se. This has the unquestionable overtones of a civilisational program. By scrutinising the many dimensions of otherness, he draws into relief the ontological presuppositions that guide the relationality of Japanese society, its ‘deep grammar’ (p.7), as he would have it. These include competing versions of *shinto*, Christianity, philo-Semitism, the emotional economy of late capitalism and an ontology of nature and death.

This can be understood as a civilisational horizon of the constitution and negotiation of difference. Because it is deep-seated, it informs many dimensions of Japan’s modern social formation. For the purposes of illustrating how this approach

could be read as civilisational sociology, I will focus briefly on his remarks on the indigenisation of knowledge and the anthropology of culture. Nativist social science has experienced a tense engagement with Western social thought since its first systematic encounters in the 1870s. A century later the *nihonjinron* genre came to preoccupy impressions of Japanese social thought. In its crudest versions, it is aggressively nationalist and presents itself as an essentially Japanese way of interpreting the world. This is a narrow perception fostered within *nihonjinron* itself and furthered by Western critics. Clammer calls forth a more nuanced view of the *nihonjinron* genre. In its more populist and nationalist expressions,¹ *nihonjinron* is a highly ideologised discourse whose weight (in terms of volume of sales and publications and levels of readership) serves to occlude other critical sources of social theory. What he terms ‘local critical theory’ (2001, p.74) coexists with *nihonjinron* on a spectrum of Japanese indigenised social science and to some degree competes with more sharply nationalist expressions. Too little detail is given on ‘local critical theory’, which is a shame as it could serve to illustrate a richer cultural landscape than has generally been assumed. However, if Clammer is right, this is a rich and vital ontological horizon. The manner in which the forces and actors in the orbit of ‘local critical theory’ negotiate existing forms of globalisation suggests quite different relationships to the rest of the world. This is a fully-fledged indigenous scientific practice, argues Clammer, and he implies that the proponents of the indigenisation strategy should be alert to it.² It would be timely to remark on the fact that little attention is paid in post-colonial criticism to this rich field of non-Western social thought, although this neglect may well be due to the very overestimation of the dominance of nationalist versions of *nihonjinron*. Regrettably, Clammer does not pursue this implication of his argument.

To understand this diversity most completely and effectively, social science must focus on the local. Anthropology is well suited to this task, but its role is far from problematic. Japanese anthropology is fairly situated as many anthropologists relate independently to both non-government organisations (NGOs) and the social movements. They are strongly connected with the indigenous Ainu and with migrant communities, Japan's external others within. They bring to a NGO-based public sphere conceptions of human rights, international obligations and a multicultural vision of citizenship. But they also deal with subjects familiar with anthropology and are compelled to critique the developmentalism of overseas aid programs and the discrimination that non-Japanese communities confront. The values underpinning their activist and scientific work diverge from Western anthropology. This is partly due to their location. It is also due to a philosophy of science that has not assimilated a Cartesian separation of rationality and the non-rational. This is not to argue that Japanese anthropology has overcome the dilemmas presented to Western anthropology by its own Eurocentric inheritance. Indeed, Clammer is still pessimistic about its capacity to move outside of a Cartesian mode of cognition. But he sees in anthropology's sociological location in Japan and its epistemological disposition to the bodily and sensuous aspects of everyday life alternative conceptions of culture capable of better capturing the experiences of Japan's others.

Anthropology is embedded then in local critical theory as praxis in its own right. The research presented in *Globalization* is anthropological and alert to local engagements with global trends. Its spread of studies is diverse and draws attention to Japan's unnoticed diversity. Its essays are based on research into the experience of work for Japanese women, casual day labourers and managers stationed overseas. Religious and craft traditions under pressure from mass tourism are also surveyed.

Transformations in the *yakuza*, the education system and social values fill out the volume. Most of the research is conducted in areas that might be seen as ‘marginal’ or outside of the mainstream of industrial society. To see these as peripheral would be a mistake. The boundaries between centres and peripheries are porous in Japan, no more so than in the 1990s. So the *yakuza* were in the past more central than previously thought, but are now experiencing marginalisation. Categories of paid workers considered marginal (women, ex-pat managers, casuals) are now deemed economically and culturally more important. The neglected history of migratory movements and the taboo topic of the *burakuma* communities respectively open up the dimension of otherness. In this respect they must now be regarded as significant issues.

Eades et al single out these changes as responses to engagement with globalisation. The title and the introduction suggest that globalisation is driving social change. However, this does little to clarify the character of social change taking place. Patterns of emigration, the impact of tourism and the experiences of overseas managers clearly relate to globalisation and, in a modest way, contribute to it. However, the nature of the transformations taking place in other areas does not seem to be adequately captured by this concept. To be sure, the actors involved are negotiating complex relations with the rest of the world. The depiction of Japanese engagement here suggests a level of cultural and political agency that conventional images of globalisation do not convey. The editors equivocate on this matter by distinguishing economic and cultural processes in a way that is ultimately unsatisfactory. It is the economic that is taken as globalisation, while cultural and political processes are described more as co-determining forms of agency and not globalisation in any meaningful sense. The editors still claim that the cultural is a

second process of globalisation, 'the global diffusion and 'creolisation' of cultural forms and meanings' (2000, p.5). The essays themselves describe processes and mediations that are multidimensional, creative and agency-driven, rather than straightforward responses to global trends. Including 'social change' in the book's title suggests a necessary ambiguity on the part of the editors.

A robust and complex image of social change requires a longer-term view as well as mindfulness of contemporary conjunctures. Hiroshi Komai too is interested in the longer view of history. This is a two-fold piece of work on migration and the development of a modern political community. It profiles foreigner communities and summarises a significant volume of survey data on the views of migrants and is therefore quite empirical in parts. This is important as a lot of 'spade work' of gathering data has been done, but little by way of ordering and organising it into an analytically useful form. Some of the most startling aspects of the data relate to recent arrivals: Thais, Iranians and 'returnee' Japanese from Peru. There is a heavy dose of figures, although the research relates directly to the conditions of migrants and their responses to the experience of long-term residence.

Komai also develops a critical theory of citizenship. This is more interesting in terms of a comparison with other texts and from the point of view of wider debates about multiculturalism. The existing national polity has been built up on a juridical and exclusivist notion of citizenship. Since the 1980s national governments have promoted a spirit of *kokusaika* (internationalisation), while denying human rights to foreigners living in Japan. It has fallen to municipal and prefectural governments to develop programs for growing communities of foreigners in the context of this contradictory political and legal environment. A number of local governments conducted extensive research into the needs of old and newcomer migrants. Initiatives

in 'internal internationalisation' were taken to address the medical, welfare and educational needs of communities. Often such programs were developed in collaboration with locally formed migrant organisations and established NGOs. One important development was the local abolition in many municipalities of the Nationality Clause prohibiting foreigners from assuming public sector employment.

There are limits to the effectiveness of municipal internationalism in achieving progress in human rights and much of the activity, although valuable, is ameliorative. Its salience to the current discussion lies in its political and cultural impact, rather than socio-economic achievements. It acts within the frame of a normative notion of citizenship while expanding an alternative political space. In terms of citizenship, the migrant presence has renewed broader reflection. Debates on citizenship revolve around the civilizational problem of how engaged or closed Japan is. This is openly recognized in the February 2000 immigration plan issued by the Ministry of Justice (pp.159-62). It calls for a deeper engagement with migrant workers and seems to be a response to the groundswell of municipal activity and varied public opinion. However, unlike the normative and inclusive municipal schemes, its purpose is plainly functionalist and assimilationist. Its priorities are the perceived shortfalls in the skill base of the workforce and easing the integration of foreigners into urban communities. Although it is couched in the language of accessibility it is formulated within the bounds of the existing monoculture.

Komai's own alternative is worth spelling out as it summarises well the logic of the local critical movement around municipal government. He advocates (and he is an advocate) a 'right to life' standard of civil rights (p.165) against both the 'closed' and 'open' plans of the Ministry of Justice. Full human rights should be accorded to foreigners and a multicultural overhaul of the state staged. Komai sees even these as

early steps. His 'right to life' principle involves what might be termed de-nationalising citizenship. The criteria for inclusion in the political community should be settlement, not nationality, and in the case of temporary workers and refugees, minimum human needs and the recognition of plight. Arching over this is simultaneous acknowledgment of difference and 'cultural unity with the home country' (p.166). It is grounded in civic political space where it is implicit in an autonomous sphere of public activity. It is also a political program that can be accommodated by a symbolic horizon that oscillates between porosity and closure.

Clammer and Komai's otherwise quite different studies point to the far-reaching potential of multiculturalism. What is clear from Eades et al's collection is that there is a historical multi-ethnicity—confirmed in recent historical and archaeological research—that presses for a multiculturalisation of the state (Denoon et al, 1996; Weiner, 1997a, 1997b). In the sociology of Japan, multiculturalism has an unclear status that I believe requires more elaborate discussion. A 'multicultural Japan' paradigm for Japan and for Japanese Studies has prominent advocates (Denoon et al, 1996; Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986; Sugimoto, 1997). They rightly argue for a transformation of perspectives. However, their notion of multiculturalism suffers some conceptual slippage and crosses over into debates on modernity and postmodernity in ways that do little to clarify the main issues. The works gathered together in this essay could act to shed light on it. The argument of the multicultural Japan approach is that monoculturalism is modernist. Multiculturalism emerges from an ethnic plurality and is therefore associated with postmodernity. In the West, it is a state-led cultural climate in which difference is accepted or conservatively tolerated. This contrasts with (in Australia, for example) past cultures of assimilation, which can be described as modern. However, when it comes to Japan, multiculturalism is

redefined as, in Sugimoto's words, 'a conglomerate of subcultures' (1997, p.5). The sociology of Australian multiculturalism identifies it in more precise terms as a state-led restructuring of ethnicity in the wake of the White Australia policy. If this conception of multiculturalism is applied to Japan, the Japanese state must be seen as *monocultural* in its management of race and ethnicity, as the research amply demonstrates. So multiculturalism should be conceptualised as the state's reconstruction or perhaps social management of ethnicity, and not merely the presence of real diversity.

Is it possible to identify the basis of an underlying multiculturalism? Clammer and Komai's penetrating analyses point the way to other possibilities. Clammer's most forceful argument in regards to multiculturalism is that Japanese society, in spite of *nihonjinron*, needs difference. It has an anti-diasporic culture that rests on a collective sense of a safe national home, a special place and a deeply rooted culture. However, this cannot sustain itself without difference:

The stranger within Japanese society does fill a necessary social role, paralleled and mirrored by Japan's own role as an outsider in relation to the larger family of nations in the total world system. The self-Orientalizing of Japan is...constantly generating difference within and creating the internal Other necessary for a significant form of cultural politics that runs in a direction very different indeed from the favoured multiculturalism of many other societies. (p.25)

Western multiculturalism is a response to diasporic migrations. Without doubt, Japan's civilizational condition has resulted in monoculturalism because of the limited

diffusion of its culture and people. But it can also be the basis for multicultural contestation. This is a question of politics. Such a politics is possible because of circulation of its cultural forms and new waves of emigration, as some of the essays in *Globalization* suggest.

A politics of multiculturalism could rest in the localised public sphere (Komai, 2001, pp.3-6). In Komai's view, municipalities are vital civic spaces from which alternative initiatives are launched. The activities of social movements around local government, NGOs and migrant communities are a creative borrowing from the experiences of the 1980s that generated the internationalisation ideology in the first place. Clammer too looks to social movements as part of a spectrum of forces contributing to local critical theory. In their activity and their theory, consumer, citizens and environmental movements exhibit an internationalism that is often open and unconditional. Migrant support groups and Burakumin and Korean defence organisations reframe the monoethnicity of the mainstream by their mere activity. Consumer movements cast doubt over the moral purpose of unrestrained growth, by radically questioning Japan's developmental political economy. In doing so, they sustain a postmaterialist ontology that binds consumer and environmental concerns. In all these movements, relationships with Others are modified. But their critique and critical activity hit at deeper roots also by bringing forward the whole issue of relationality; that is, relations to the world outside, the environment and to foreigners and strangers within. Monoculturalism is displaced in the mundane life of the social movements and the civic horizons that they animate.

What all three books portray are different forms of sociability that coexist and, to a degree, compete with the official monoculture. Groupism was accepted as Japan's national character until the 'small tradition' of critical sociology problematised it in

the 1980s (Mouer and Sugimoto, 1986). The group culture can now be set in perspective as one form of sociability that subjects slip in and out of. Undoubtedly, it is premised on a relationship to the world outside of the national home and the others within. Nonetheless, the pressing foreigner presence coupled with the regional and international spread of Japan is forcing a re-evaluation of cultural boundaries that is most intense at a local level. A greater acceptance of migrants is made feasible by the slow expansion of diversity in Japan's public sphere. It remains to be seen whether an unqualified hospitality, as Derrida describes it (Derrida, 2000), takes root in Japanese society. Moreover, the cosmological, or perhaps civilizational, capacity to cope with such transformations continues to be contingent and contestable.

Can the political forces capable of such a transformation be generated in these spaces? Some conditions constrain the activity of the municipal and prefectural governments that Clammer and Komai discuss. Local governmentalities have varied responses to internationalisation and there is some correlation between a high foreigner profile and a significant degree of open engagement. Moreover, there are constitutional limits to their capacities and jurisdiction. Instead, Clammer's idea of a 'deep politics' may more adequately encapsulate the underlying contestatory conditions in Japan. The disputes that the social movements are embroiled in are ultimately ontological. This is illustrated most acutely in the Ainu claims to rights over land and waterways, periodic battles against damming of important rivers and in all-embracing types of environmentalism. In the deep politics of these movements the separation of nature and people is incomprehensible. An ontologically recast relationship of humanity and ecology informs a green consciousness that is more pervasive than it appears to be. Nonetheless, there are two paradoxes that should not be ignored. The first is rampant infrastructural growth guided by the developmental

state (McCormack, 1996). The second is the lack of organisation at a peak level with any weight. For example Greenpeace has a low membership and there is no stand-alone Greens Party. Moreover, the organised Left where there might be affinity with the social movements is at an historical low. Despite the disposition to incorporate ecology into a closer relationship with culture (often seen as the principal juxtaposition of Western culture), there should be doubt about the existing political momentum and the likelihood that it will have a lasting impact on the developmental logic of Japanese political economy. Likewise this reviewer has reservations about the capacity of municipal movements to more forcefully prevail in multiculturalising the relationship to Others. These two paradoxes are something to note, but regrettably cannot be explored here.

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¹ See Sugimoto, Yoshio (1999) Making Sense of *Nihonjinron*, *Thesis Eleven*, 57, pp.81-96.

² Compare with Syed Alatas, Western Theory, East Asian Realities and the Social, in Su-Hoon Lee (ed) *Sociology in East Asia and its Struggle for Creativity*, Madrid: ISA, 1996.